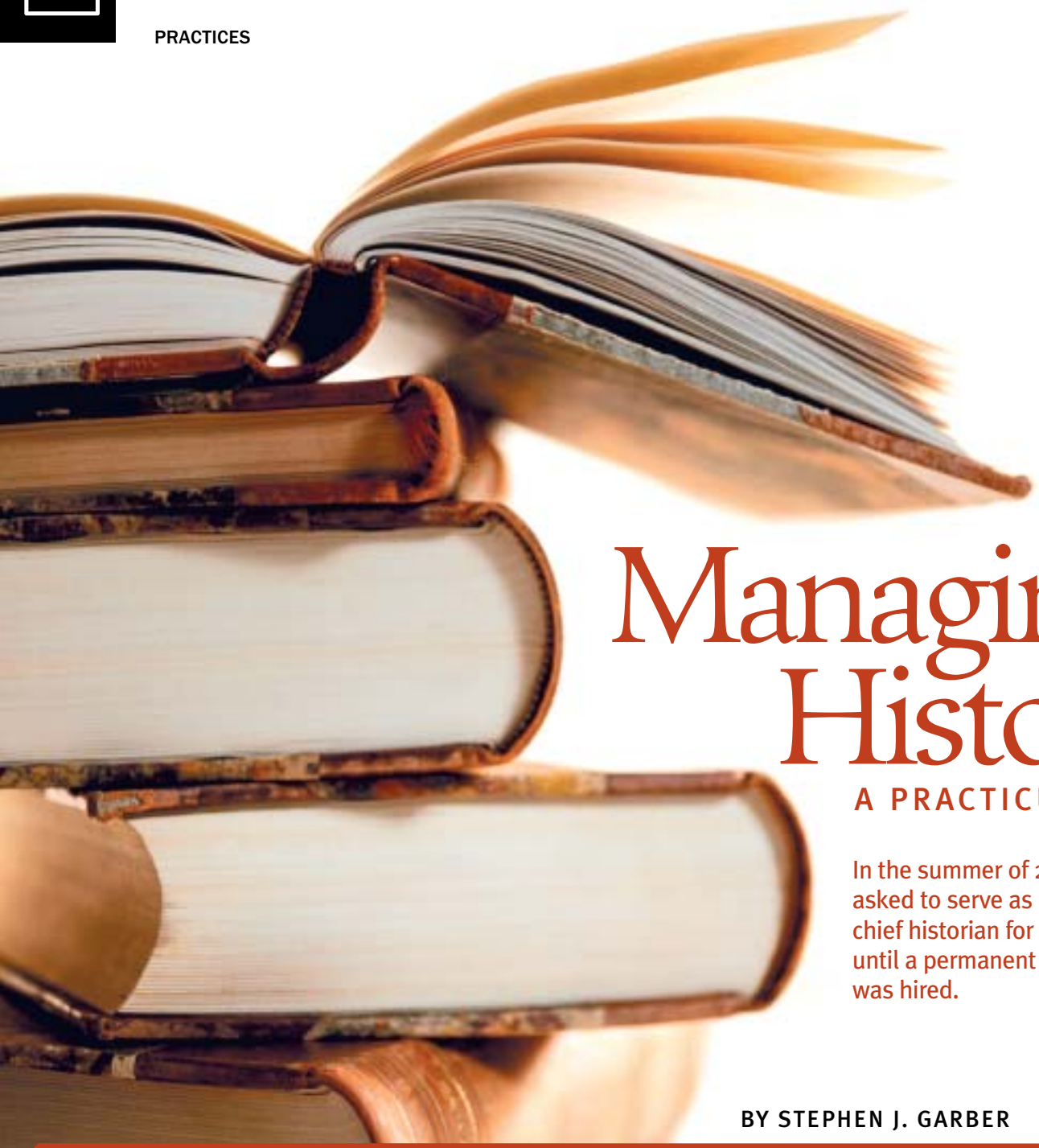

Managing History:

A PRACTICUM

In the summer of 2002, I was asked to serve as interim chief historian for NASA until a permanent replacement was hired.

BY STEPHEN J. GARBER

ROGER LAUNIUS, THE PREVIOUS CHIEF HISTORIAN, HAD accepted a job offer from the Smithsonian. I guess you could say I was the logical person to step in while the search began for his replacement. I had been with the NASA History Office since 1995, and had worked closely with Roger. While not officially called his deputy, I suppose you could say I had functioned in large part as one.

I had established and overseen a successful intern program in our office and had also worked with various outside historians as contractors; the work had piqued my interest in project management. Even though I understood my work as chief historian would be temporary, I looked at it as a good career opportunity. I enjoyed doing historical research and working on my own, but I wanted to improve my management skills.

My time as acting chief historian and the experiences that led up to it have underscored a management principal that's worth repeating: Projects are people.

Practice One: Leverage your resources to create win-win situations for both you and your team members.

Here is an example of some useful practical knowledge I gained managing a small project that I thought would serve me in good stead in my new assignment. Several years before I became the interim chief historian, I had been given the task of managing the History Office website, including supervising a small volunteer staff. We usually have one or two people who do some volunteer work for our office, and I used them to post new content to the site.

Then there was this other person, Chris Gamble. He wasn't working as an official volunteer for us, but he spent a lot of time volunteering criticism about our website—especially regarding every place he noticed a typographical error. I appreciated his feedback but I needed to find a better way to channel his help.

It occurred to me that I should try to recruit Chris into doing something more proactive, and I asked him if he would be willing to look over some new Web pages before we "went live" with them. That way he could catch errors before they went public on the Web, rather than later. He agreed.

After Chris had worked with us for a while, it wasn't such a big leap to ask him if he would be interested in preparing out-of-print publications for the Web in an electronic format. Since then, he has formatted literally dozens of books for us that are now available online. As a small token of our thanks, I send him free copies of all

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of our new publications—but he continues to work on a volunteer basis. If we were to hire a computer professional to do all this HTML work, it would cost a lot more than we could afford.

He's done all this incredible volunteer work for us from his home in Switzerland. I've never met him in person, and I think I've spoken on the phone to him once; we communicate by email and snail mail. A happy ending to the story (although he continues to work with me) is that I nominated him for a prestigious NASA award, which he received. Afterwards, he wrote me a moving email, telling me how proud he is to be part of the NASA team.

Sometimes when I'm having a bad day, I think about Chris Gamble. I'm just glad to work at an agency that engenders such enthusiasm from the public and in an office at NASA that gives me the flexibility to leverage resources in unusual ways. I don't think too many other people in government have the opportunity to tap such volunteer efforts.

Practice Two: Because moving from team member to manager changes responsibilities, you may need to develop different communication strategies for dealing with people you already know.

Personalities rub people different ways, and dealing with all the different personalities around me when I began working in the role of the chief historian was the big challenge I faced. Suddenly, I understood why, for example, Roger had clashed with certain people. Often I clashed with them, too. In the past I tended to vent or openly criticize other people I was unhappy with. I realized quickly that as head of the department I couldn't afford to do that any longer; it would be counter-productive to our work, besides being unprofessional and unkind.

Today, my communication style varies, depending on the person I'm dealing with. I like to use the coaching analogy: You've got to figure out what each player needs to stay motivated and productive; some may need reassurance, some "tough love," and others "just the facts." In practice, though, I know that there's not an easy answer for each personality.

One person I work with, for example, kept calling me and wanted to have long phone conversations to discuss every little detail of the project he was working on. I began scheduling regular tag-up meetings and asked him to save all non-urgent items for our meetings. Then the tag-up meetings began running longer than I wanted. I began scheduling meetings with start and end times. I took a stronger role in leading the meetings and I closed the meetings on time. Our meetings became more efficient, but then I was concerned that we might not get around to covering everything we needed to cover. So, you see, it's not as though I've found a perfect solution, but I have learned to think through different options for communication.

I often think back to two professors I knew in grad school. One taught a class on strategic management and pointed out that some people prefer to get their information verbally and some prefer the written form. This seems obvious, but I hadn't thought about it that way before. At the time, I was a grad assistant for another professor who liked to call meetings with me and his other assistant to "chew the fat" for a while. These bull sessions seemed like a waste of time to me and I couldn't figure out why he liked to talk so much. I had wrongly assumed that because he was a researcher and writer, he always liked to get his information in written form. So the obvious moral to the story is that each person has a different communication style.

Practice Three: Identify those people whose judgment you trust and be willing to seek out their advice.

To get through this situation and others that have come up, I have relied on people around me for advice—often people I had known, but never turned to in the past. There is one particular person in my office that I've always thought of as a level-headed individual. I hope she doesn't mind that I've begun to use her as a sounding board. Indeed, it seems to have encouraged her to use me as a sounding board, as well, for things that she's wrestling with.

Roger was very good about offering to help after he left. Sometimes I turned to him to ask his advice on situations, even if I already had a good idea of how I would handle them. I didn't call him with every little decision, but I talked to him when I thought a situation warranted extra attention. When he was still my boss, he had often asked me for my input on things. We seemed to be in sync in terms of our judgment in many cases.

Finding mentors like these people has been helpful in grounding me, giving me perspective, and reinforcing my initial learnings.

I also had lunch with the head of our History Advisory Committee a few times over the year I served as chief historian. I felt that it was a good thing to do when I was feeling a lot of stress or when I didn't know how to handle certain situations. It wasn't as though he could offer any magic advice—but he is older than I, again has good judgment, and in general is a reasonable person with some gravitas. At first it surprised me when he would ask me personal questions like, "How is your wife doing? How is your health?" I wanted to focus our precious lunch hour on a host of work-related questions. But I quickly realized that talking about those personal things helped me to put any problems at work in perspective.

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The story ends, or perhaps it's just a chapter

In November of 2003, I finished my temporary assignment as the chief historian and handed off the job to Dr. Steven J. Dick. I've returned to my role as a senior member of the History Office.

Was it a good year? I think so. Taking on a senior management position was a stretch for me, but knowing what I know now, I will be happy to stretch myself again when the right opportunity arises. •

Making history at NASA

Just one year after the agency was formed, the NASA History Office began its work of documenting and preserving the organization's remarkable history. Every year, the chief historian oversees publication of a number of new books, monographs, pamphlets, and newsletters on aerospace history, in addition to publishing invaluable out-of-print books and monographs online.

As a member of the History Office, **STEPHEN J. GARBER** has written on such aerospace history topics as President Kennedy's attitudes towards space, the design of the Space Shuttle, and the Congressional cancellation of NASA's Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence program. His Masters thesis compared cultural views of technology in the U.S. and the Soviet Union by contrasting the designs of the U.S. Space Shuttle and the Soviet Buran Space Shuttle.

"One interesting part of my job is responding to ad-hoc requests from all sorts of people who have ideas about what we should cover," says Garber. "I often hear from retired scientists or engineers who now want to write the history of the program that they last worked on."

Garber's approach is to try to offer some guidance on the nature of history, and how history can be useful in everyday life."Basically, we all consider the past, at least subconsciously, in making decisions," explains Garber. "But we can usually make better decisions by considering history more explicitly and analytically."

To give non-historians direction, Garber developed a packet, "Thinking about NASA History," which can be found online at http://history.nasa.gov/thinking/index.html.